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Azerbaijan's Mount Sabalan/ Savalan (Sebīlān) where Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) Communed with God?

*by Mahir Khalifa-zadeh**

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Mount Sabalan (Azerbaijani Turkish: *Savalan*) where as per the tradition Zoroaster communed with God,

Ardabil county, Azerbaijan, Iran

Mount Sabalan/ Savalan/ Savellan (Pahlavi: Sebīlān, 4811 m) is located in Ardabil county of Azerbaijan in Iran. The people of Azerbaijan also call Mount Soltan Savalan. They consider Savalan a holy mountain.

Intriguingly, many researchers consider that Prophet Zoroaster (Avestan: *Zaraθuštra*, Greek: *Ζωροάστρης Zōroastrēs*) first appeared in the west of Iran, either in Atropatene (Pahlavi: *Ādurbādagān*, now Azerbaijan) or in Media.

Indeed, several sources place Zoroaster in Adarbījān or Media - Atropatene and even point to the town of Urmia as Zoroaster's native place. The others even indicate that Zoroaster's father's house stood near the river Darja/Darej (Pahlavi: *Dāraja*) that flows from Mount Savellan (Sebīlān) in Adarbījān (Atropatene) into the river Aras (Araxes).

However, Arabic writer Kazwini associates Zoroaster with Shīz, the capital of Atropatene. Rawlinson identifies Shīz with Takht-e Soleiman, holding one of three Great Fires of ancient Iran in Ādur Gušnasp (now Azar Goshnasp) fire temple in Azerbaijan.

The passage from Kazwini (quoted from Rawlinson) reads: "In Shiz is the fire- temple of Azerekhsh (Pahlavi: *Ādur Gušnasp*), the most celebrated of the Pyrsa of the Magi; in the days of the fire-worship, the kings always came on foot, upon pilgrimage. The temple of Azerekhsh is ascribed to Zeratusht, the founder of the Magian religion, who went, it is said from Shiz to the mountain of Sebīlān and, after remaining there some time in retirement, returned with the Zend-Avesta, which, although written in the Old Persian language, could not be understood without a commentary. After this he declared himself to be a prophet."

In the meantime, Williams Jackson indicates that the Avesta mentions a hill by the river Darja where Zoroaster communed with Ahura Mazdā. He argues that the hill (zbarah) or mountain (gairi) is Mount Sebīlān. The Avesta's Darja River possibly, according to him, is the modern river Darya (?) which flows from Mt. Sebīlān into the Aras River (Araxes).

Interestingly, the Avesta mentions 16 perfect lands (asah) and countries (šōiθra), which Ahura Mazdā created for His people. Avestan Geography identifies Avesta's Iran Vej (Avestan: Ayriianəm Vaēǰah, Pahlavi: Ērān-wēz, “the area of the Aryans”) with Atropatene [Azerbaijan].

Jackson writes that the Bundahish (Pahlavi: *Bun-dahišn(īh)*, "Primal Creation", an encyclopedic collection of beliefs about Zoroastrian cosmology) connects Iran Vej (the holy land of Zoroastrianism where Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) was born and founded his religion there) directly with Atropatene: "Aīrān vej pavan kōst-ī Atarō-pātakān".

However, James Darmesteter identifies the first province Airyanem Vaeja (Iran Vej), or Eranwej with Arran (nowadays known as Karabagh, present-day Azerbaijan).

He translates the passage from Avesta Vendidat/Vidēvdād (Fargard 1) as the following: “Ahura Mazda spake Zarathushtra, saying: The first of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the Airyana Vaeja, by the Vanguhi Daitya.” He comments that the river Vanguhi Daitya (Avestan: *Vaŋuhī Dāityā* “the good Dāityā”) belongs to Arran and it should be the Aras River (Araxes).

Truly, the region of Arran is Arrān in Pahlavi or Albania in Latin. The Pahlavi and Sasanian books introduced Airyanem Vaeja in around Azerbaijan. Some historians like James Darmesteter and Erns Herzfeld believed that the location of Airyanem Vaeja is Azerbaijan and in around the Caucasus.

In the meantime, the Bundahish indicates that the river Darja/ Darej, near which stood the house of Zoroaster's father had been in Iran Vej. In this regard, Jackson notes that the Bundahish likewise alludes to Zoroaster's first offering worship in Iran Vej. He provides Darmesteter's translation of the passage from the Avesta: "Zoroaster communed with Ahura Mazda on the high bank of the Darej, sitting (?) before the good Ahura Mazda.. ."

Next, Jackson states that "With regard to localizations, there is good ground for believing that Airan Vej (Avestan: *Ayriianəm Vaēǰah*) is to be identified in part at least with Ādarbaijān, and that the ancient river Darej of the Avesta is identical with the modern Daryai. The Daryai Rūd flows from Mt. Savalān

(Sebīlān), in Ādarbaijān, northward into the Aras River (Araxes)."

Intriguingly, Jackson provides importantly interesting details on Zoroaster's native place and his parents: "Oriental tradition seems to be fairly correct in assigning, as his native land, the district of Atropatene or Ādarbaijān, to the west of Media, or even more precisely the neighborhood about Lake Urumiah. There is ground, furthermore, for believing in the tradition which says that his father was a native of Ādarbaijān, - a region of naphtha wells and oil fountains, - and that Zoroaster's mother was from the Median Ragha (Rai)."

He continues: "In the latter region probably Zoroaster was born and seems to have spent there the first part of his life, probably by the river Darja. It was there his religious meditations began. That account for his name being associated with all this territory Urmiah, Shīz, Mount Sebīlān."

Finally, Jackson concludes: "There is a great reason to believe that if, as seems most likely, Zoroaster was born in Atropatene, he was drawn toward the important city of Ragha, somewhat perhaps as Christ went to Jerusalem."

In Sum, Azerbaijan's Mount Savalan is one of the sacred places in Zoroastrianism where, according to some sources, Prophet Zoroaster received a divine revelation. Nietzsche mentions that Prophet Zoroaster ascended Mount Savalan.

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